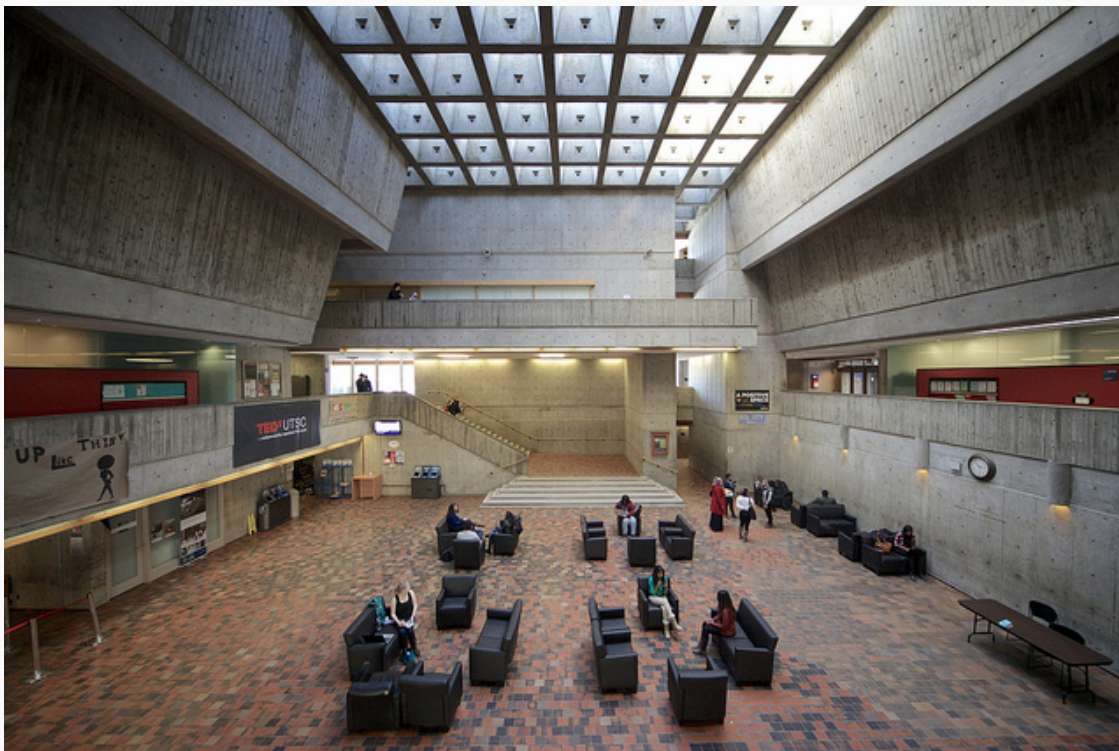


Local civic participation can help reinforce the legitimacy of the democratic system

By The Author

*Does citizen involvement with politics and local issues influence the way that citizens view their democratic institutions? According to **Carolina Johnson**, the answer is yes, with new research showing that getting involved in a local level helps to reinforce the legitimacy of political and democratic institutions and creates more democratically minded citizens. In the context of a seeming political consensus amongst UK parties on the desirability of creating a more civically minded populace, this should be seen as encouraging.*



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Whether touted as a cure-all by [Labour](#) or by [Conservative](#) governments, increasing local participation in community governance has regularly been suggested as a counter to widespread public disenchantment with politics. Such assertions appear plausible at first glance, but they have been less often subjected to empirical testing. While on the one hand, it may seem obviously intuitive that more involvement locally would encourage perceptions of a more democratic system, on the other hand, isn't local decision-making the province of dissatisfied, 'not-in-my-back yard' activists and cynical or disruptive protestors? At the very least, perhaps there is a concern that letting people get more involved will make them even more sceptical if they get the chance to see "the sausage being made".

In [a research article](#) recently published in the academic journal *Political Studies*, I set out to test the common expectation that there is an association between higher levels of local civic participation and people's attitudes toward the democratic system as a whole. Using the richly detailed data from the (since discontinued) [Citizenship Survey](#), I examined the relationships between the extent of people's participation in local civic activities and decision-making groups and their attitudes toward their local and national governments in England and Wales. This measure of civic participation includes participation in organised consultative and decision-making roles, such as acting as a school governor or participating in a local government consultation, while excluding simple volunteerism and general 'helping' activity.

While the precise shape of this relationship varied across regions of the country and between particular subsets of the data, local participation was consistently associated with stronger legitimating attitudes across every region and group. The high number of people interviewed in this survey (over 14,000 in a single wave of the study) allows for high confidence in statistical estimates of the relationships captured in this survey. This effect persists when I control for local social capital and cooperation, and is independent of respondents' satisfaction with their local government. Even if people are disappointed with the outcomes from their local authority, the positive effect of civic activity on their understanding of the value of democratic participation is unchanged.

Relaxing the assumption that there must be a linear relationship, if any, between civic participation and attitudes toward democratic government, it is possible to draw out a number of interesting additional implications from the data. One of the main conclusions from this study is that the apparent effect of local engagement is greatest at lower levels of participation. Introducing one new civic participation activity (such as working with a local parent or tenants' group or participating in a planning consultation) generally has a much greater effect on people's attitudes when such activity is less common for them. Giving people who are already highly involved in their local communities another chance to have a say has less of an impact than prioritising opportunities for those who are not already engaged, or are only marginally involved.

A key practical implication this observation from the data is that if expanded local control or civic engagement is to have any positive impact on attitudes toward government overall, development of any new opportunities should focus on outreach and mobilisation of less involved members of the community. Simply creating a new forum or consultation will not offer the greatest benefit for democratic legitimacy if all it does is produce yet another meeting attended by folks who are already devoting their free time to civic activity. In fact, if democratic revitalisation is the objective, as much or more benefit may be obtained by reaching out more widely in communities to draw in those who have typically been excluded, rather than just multiplying opportunities for existing civic actors to get more involved.

An additional result to emerge from this study is evidence that that people differentiate between how effectively they can have an influence on policy or how much they value democracy and how much they trust Parliament. Getting people more involved in their own local self-governance can increase their understanding of the legitimacy and value of democratic government as a process, but does not provide a fix to concerns about declining trust in Westminster. Scepticism about the trustworthiness of national politicians is distinct from faith in the democratic system as a whole. This is not necessarily a bad thing; for a representative democracy to function well, in fact, there needs to be a public scepticism of elected officials. These results suggest that increasing local civic participation may be an effective way to encourage people to value a democratic system of governance, but that this should not be expected to increase approval ratings for Parliament or result in more compliant citizens. Civic participation is ultimately about creating and reinforcing engaged citizens, who believe they can and should make a difference within a democratic system. It is not just about creating compliance or cooperation with government policy.

Finally, it is worth noting that this research has been focused on the aggregate impact of existing common forms of civic participation, rather than the development of new types of participatory spaces. As such, it is encouraging to local actors working strengthen British democracy by expand participation in existing public spaces. However, much recent and exciting work around democratic participation in Britain has been focused on innovations in public engagement and participatory governance that may merit additional research. Local governments continue to experiment with ideas like [cooperative councils](#) and [participatory budgeting](#), providing a brilliant opportunity for any observers concerned with the depth of democratic participation in our societies to investigate even more closely whether and when local civic opportunities can build stronger democratic citizens.

Note: this post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our comments policy before posting. The shortened URL for this post is: <http://buff.ly/TTRuDP>

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